

OPINION

The Debate: CONTROLLING THE CIA

Today's debate includes our opinion that the CIA must be restrained from conducting outside-the-law, covert operations, an opposing view from Virginia, other views from Colorado, Georgia, and the District of Columbia, and voices from across the USA.

Covert operations weaken democracy

As the slain dictator crumples to the ground, the assassin calmly disassembles his rifle and ambles into the night mist. Mission accomplished.

That's the way covert action works in novels and films. But in Bob Woodward's real-life book about the CIA, the plot goes awry. The terrorist target lives; 80 bystanders die.

The CIA has once more succumbed to the lure of the illegal, murky, and often deadly world of covert actions.

Bad habits like these are hard to kick.

If the Iran-contra hearings in Congress haven't made that clear, then the controversial new book by Woodward will.

Some of the book's tales have been disputed. But in its pages we find the CIA, led by its late director, William Casey, back at its old dirty tricks: exceeding its authority, skirting the law, and lying to the White House, the Congress, and the people.

It's like flipping the calendar back 15 years: A shocked nation learned that our spies plotted to kill Cuba's Castro and the Congo's Lumumba; they interfered in the internal affairs of Chile, the Dominican Republic, Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam; and they spied on U.S. reporters.

Congress thought it had stopped this madness. But now we learn that the CIA helped set up the assassination attempt of a Mideastern sheik, underwrote a Lebanese tyrant, and sold arms to Iran, diverting the profits to rebels in Nicaragua.

Unauthorized, covert activities like these embarrass our government. They damage the USA's interests.

The CIA should stick to spying. That's its job — gathering and analyzing information from all over the world to help our policy-makers make their decisions. And it does it well.

But when the CIA's energies and resources are squandered pursuing a private foreign policy, the agency's intelligence responsibilities suffer. When the CIA's objectivity is suspect, the information it provides is tainted.

The CIA has no business involving our government in assassination plots or in trying to overthrow governments, despite what you'll read elsewhere on this page. The public doesn't want that. And neither does Congress.

Ours is an open society that works only when the electorate is informed. There's no place for extralegal operations hidden from our elected leaders and the public.

Ours is a government built on an ingenious system of checks and balances, responsibilities and accountabilities shared by the president, the Congress, and the courts. It can't work when our leaders lie to each other and to us.

What do we accomplish if, in the name of democracy, we adopt our enemies' methods? We weaken democracy.

The CIA's new leader, William Webster, promises to reform the way the CIA does business. And President Reagan has promised changes, too.

But we've heard that before. To make sure, Congress must tighten its control of the CIA — not with promises, not with gentlemen's agreements, but with laws.

That's democracy. And that's what we're fighting for.

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times _____
The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today 10-A
The Chicago Tribune _____

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